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Mark Twain in China by Selina Lai-Henderson (review)

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Selina Lai-Henderson. *Mark Twain in China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015. x, 164 pp. Hardcover \$45.00, ISBN 978-0-8047-8964-6.

I don't see how one can ever know a foreign language well enough to make reading poems in it worthwhile. Foreigners' ideas of good English poems are dreadfully crude: Byron and Poe and so on. The Russians liking Burns. But deep down I think foreign languages irrelevant. If that glass thing over there is a window, then it isn't a fenster or a fenêtre or whatever. *Hautes Fenêtres*, my God! A writer can have only one language, if language is going to mean anything to him.

*Philip Larkin, interview, Paris Review no. 84
(Summer 1982)*

Those that understood him smiled at one another and shook their heads; but, for mine own part, it was Greek to me.

William Shakespeare, Julius Caesar

In 1995, I was an unemployed college graduate with a degree in English literature and had the good luck to find a job at the eleventh hour teaching English for a year at an elite university in Beijing. My supervisor there assured me that my students, the majority of whom were professors at the university, were already fluent in English and were only taking the class because it was a recertification requirement, and also, he confided, because they found it novel to take an English class taught by an American. He handed me the textbook, but added that the students would welcome the chance to read a “real American book.” Armed with nothing more than a belief that speaking English was more than enough preparation to teach English, I asked the students what they had always wanted to read in the original; we could spend the whole year on this book, if necessary, I told them. The answer was nearly unanimous: “Ha-Ke.” Further questioning revealed that the book being described was Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*. Photocopies of the first chapter were procured from the library’s copy, and we agreed to see how far we would get at the next class meeting. I excitedly went back to my room, book in hand, marking out the book in conservative increments of ten pages per week. At our next class meeting, twenty-five expectant faces looked up at me, their pages painstakingly marked all over with underlining and tiny Chinese characters. They looked so confident that I would be able to explain it all. I never saw that look again in any of their faces. We spent ninety minutes in class that day, and we did not finish the first paragraph.

You don’t know about me without you have read a book by the name of “The Adventures of Tom Sawyer,” but that ain’t no matter. That book was made by Mr. Mark Twain, and he told

the truth, mainly. There was things which he stretched, but mainly he told the truth. That is nothing. I never seen anybody but lied, one time or another, without it was Aunt Polly, or the widow, or maybe Mary. Aunt Polly—Tom's Aunt Polly, she is—and Mary, and the Widow Douglas, is all told about in that book—which is mostly a true book; with some stretchers, as I said before.

So goes the first paragraph of the novel. From the first sentence, it is serpentine in its misdirection; Twain's characteristic formal playfulness gives purchase to his thematic preoccupations of reversal and revelation. It knowingly refers to itself as a book, and as one composed of half-truths; it doubles down by making those claims with intricate double negatives. The double negatives are not the problem ("You don't know about me without you have read," "that ain't no matter"); they could be approximated with Chinese equivalences. The metafictional gestures and the reproaches for insisting on distinctions between truth and fiction were no obstacle: the class did not need an expert on Cao Xueqin's *Hongloumeng* (or *Dream of Red Chambers*) among them to make that comparison, although we did have one. It was that all of these aspects were delivered in the vernacular idiom that gave Huck, and the novel, a unique and particular voice. The class peppered me with questions about each word of that first sentence. We soldiered on, paragraph by paragraph, for a few more meetings, and eventually we returned defeated to the predictability of our textbook.

Huckleberry Finn was difficult for us to process. It certainly was not a text for teaching standard English vocabulary and sentence structure. Their questions were probing and intense. Why was the sentence written in this way? What were the implications of its conveyance? Could I translate it into plain English? How would I translate it into Chinese? My own question was a simpler one: why had they all picked *Huck Finn*? One answer was simple enough: they had all read it, in Chinese. *Huckleberry Finn* has been translated no less than ninety times into Chinese, according to Selina Lai-Henderson, and, among other things, her book *Mark Twain in China* sets out to investigate why. Lai-Henderson provides a back translation into English of the first sentence as it appeared in the earliest translation, committed by Zhang Duosheng and Guozhen in 1942 that reads: "You do not know me, unless you have not read *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, but, this is not a problem" (p. 106). The translators valiantly endeavored to translate Twain's sentence into Chinese (要是你不知道我，除非你沒有讀過“孤兒歷險記”；但是那是沒有問題的) but became entangled in the morass of negations and nothings in those lines: "don't," "without," "ain't," "no," "nothing," "never," and "without," again, for good measure. The final product could not have won its legions of fans from its accuracy, nor from its ability to match Twain's style. Lai-Henderson suggests that perhaps instead it was in large part due to Twain's other writings, especially his nonfiction political essays criticizing American racism as well as its imperialist activities, that made him a politically and culturally acceptable author in the Chinese-reading world.

Lai-Henderson's book builds on two threads of inquiry pioneered by the Twain expert Shelley Fishkin. One is an examination of the close relationship between Twain's social criticism essays, especially on racism in American culture and in its policies. The other is an examination of Twain as a transnational figure, by looking at his fiction in the context of global literature; how do writers and critics in other languages read and interpret Twain? *Mark Twain in China* seeks to fill an "important gap in Twain scholarship, American literature, and transnational studies by pointing to the repercussions of the work . . . across a global theater" (p. 5). The first half of the book explores Twain's own encounters with China and the Chinese in America, as well as his writings about these encounters. While Lai-Henderson acknowledges that Twain's feelings about the experience of black Americans was far more influential to his work, she seeks to draw attention to how his observation of brutality toward the Chinese may have also prepared the way for his trenchant criticism of racism, setting it in relief. In chapter 1, she focuses on Twain's collaboration with Bret Harte on the 1877 play *Ah Sin*, which was based on Harte's famous satirical and popularly misunderstood poem "Plain Language from Truthful James," better known as "The Heathen Chinee." Lai-Henderson argues for a deeper consideration of Twain's anti-imperialist beliefs that can help to contextualize the intended satire at work in the play. The second chapter traces the formation of those beliefs, by examining the period bracketed by two Pacific voyages made by Twain to the Hawaiian Islands, in 1866 and 1895. The third chapter discusses Twain's firm stance against imperialism, as represented by the essays "To the Person Sitting in Darkness," "To My Missionary Critics," and "The United States of Lyncherdom."

The remainder of the book turns to the reception of Twain's work in China, focusing especially on the ways that Twain's works fit in neatly with the values of the intelligentsia of the New Culture Movement in China. Already absorbed in a fervor for works in translation—at a time when translated fiction out-published original works of fiction written in Chinese—and sharing a deep interest in works that depicted the social realities of their time, as well as a commitment to language reform that insisted on replicating vernacular speech, influential figures such as Liang Qichao and Lu Xun found their values embodied in Mark Twain. Chapter 4 examines the influence of Twain's essays, especially, on Chinese readers from the early Republican period into the Cultural Revolution and beyond. The fifth and final chapter of the book, "Translation, Appropriation, and Continuation: *Huck Finn's* Chinese Adventures in the Late 20th Century and Beyond," provides a fascinating view of the complications attached to translating this many-times-translated novel. Lai-Henderson focuses on several case studies within the novel that shed light on the complications of interpretation that result from translation decisions related to "the language of a fourteen-year-old boy, Pap Finn's expressions of his racist attitude, and Jim's black vernacular" (p. 9). In her epilogue, she shares the hope that the book will "bring us a step forward in appreciating just

how complicated and important a global sense of literary studies will be not only to Twain but also to US studies and literature” (p. 130).

This hope is quite compelling. Was it the way that Huck’s story resonated with the tenets of socialist realism? How did the themes about race ramify in languages that do not share that history? Did the emphases change depending on the political situation—how could we see Huck as a proletarian hero? These are the kinds of questions that *Mark Twain in China* inspires, and no doubt there will be other fascinating studies to come that will build on Lai-Henderson’s book. I, for one, hope that this book will inspire more scholarship by those able to compare original texts and their translations. The difficulty of a project of this kind lies in the fact that, although its net is cast beyond the orbit of the Anglophone to interrogate the significance of global circulations, it still must defer to the assumption that the reader will not be able to read the foreign language under discussion. Translating a text is an act of close reading and an exegesis that reveals as much about the translator and his or her context as it reveals about the original text. The fine points of translations and mistranslations must be shown to the reader, therefore, on trust; comparisons are ultimately made from English text (the original) to English text (filtered first into Chinese, and then back into English), and yet these translations are assumed to be invisible. Yet, part of the argument at work here is that translations cannot possibly be invisible: they always bear the trace of the translator, so that a translation of another’s translation inserts a new voice, a new context, and a new interpretation to the dialogue. But this point is too often ignored. To reverse Casca’s point in *Julius Caesar*: “It is all English to them.” What accounts for the specifics of a translation may well account for the specifics of the age in which it is written or, to make less grandiose a point, the specifics of that particular translator’s understanding. There are times, of course, when we stretch, but mainly we aim for the truth.

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